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# Who Makes it Easy? Courting Journalists through Congressional Web Sites

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*Scholars are just beginning to understand how members of Congress use the Internet to meet their legislative and electoral goals. We performed a content analysis of all the official web sites maintained by members of Congress in the fall of 2002 to determine whether and how members used their sites to court the traditional mass media. Our analysis revealed that the likelihood of a member using his or her web site to solicit media coverage depends upon numerous variables, including chamber, geographic region, age, gender and race. Interestingly, ideology and electoral margin were largely irrelevant. We discuss these results in terms of members' electoral goals, policy objectives, and desire for institutional advancement*

**R**enowned Congressional scholar Richard Fenno states that lawmakers serving in the House of Representatives (presumably, senators as well) have three goals: re-election, influence in Congress, and making good public policy (Fenno

1973, 1). Scholars of congressional communication have spent decades studying and documenting how members and their staffs use traditional media—television, radio, and newspapers—to achieve these three ends (See for example Cook 1989; Hess 1986, 1991; Kedrowski 1996; Lipinski 2004; Vinson 2003). Practical concerns make access to the media desirable, if not imperative, for goal-oriented members. The populations of house districts and states continue to grow so members of both chambers represent hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people. Consequently, personal, “retail” politics becomes impossible and members must depend upon the media to communicate with their constituents. Moreover, as Congress becomes less hierarchical and more diffuse, new pathways to legislative influence have developed, including becoming a media personality as a means of enhancing one’s power. Former speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) is the quintessential example of a lawmaker whose mastery of this approach facilitated his political success (Frantzich and Sullivan 1996). Similarly, some members of Congress use the media to influence the legislative process, which furthers their goals of increasing their influence within the institution and of passing good public policy. In the early 1990s, for example, former Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) used the media as a vehicle for interjecting the AIDS issue into the Senate’s legislative agenda (Kedrowski 1996). At about the same time, former Representative Mary Rose Oakar (D-OH) sought media attention through celebrity testimony to push for increased research funding for breast cancer, an effort her successors continue even today (Kedrowski and Sarow 2007). Additionally, some members (especially senators) may seek media coverage because they aspire to win election to higher office. As Stephen Hess (1986) observed, journalists frequently quoted former senators Robert Dole (R-KS) and Hubert Humphrey (D-MN) as experts on multiple issues and both later became Presidential candidates. Con-

temporary examples of the same are John McCain (R-AZ) and former senator John Edwards (D-NC), both of whom were presidential hopefuls in 2004, and both of whom were candidates again in 2008.

Presumably, if members of Congress were interested in seeking traditional media coverage to achieve the ends articulated by Fenno 30 years ago, then today, they should be interested in using the Internet to further their objectives because, to date, there is no evidence suggesting members have altered or abandoned the priorities that Fenno identified. However, for all of its potential, the Internet is not yet the primary source of political information for most citizens, even those who are technologically-savvy (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resinick 2004). Therefore, members may recognize that their Web sites have the potential to increase the amount of coverage provided by traditional media outlets. Accordingly, our central objective is to determine whether members structure their sites in ways that facilitate reporters' efforts to locate information and thus subtly encourage reporters to frame their stories favorably.

### CONGRESS, THE WEB, AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA

There is a small but growing literature that examines Congress in the electronic age. Congress, as an institution, was rather slow to capitalize upon the promises of the Internet, a technology that it helped to develop through federal subsidies. Congress entered the electronic age in the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress (1993-1994) when Representative Charlie Rose (D-NC), then-chair of the Committee on House Administration, instituted a "Gopher" system that functioned as a rudimentary text-based database (Owens, Davis, and Strickler 1999). In 1995, under the leadership of Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA), Congress entered the electronic age in earnest. Gingrich, an advocate of technology, was appalled by how inaccessible the institution was by the standards of the day.

By 1995, he established *Thomas*, the searchable database hosted by the Library of Congress (Dreier 2003). By the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress (2001-2002), all Congressional offices—save one—hosted their own web sites, and most accepted constituent communications via Email.

In the decade since Gingrich's election, the World Wide Web has revolutionized congressional communications. Not only can constituents easily find information about their members, they can also use online forms to write to members. Web sites provide members with the opportunity to present a holistic picture of themselves to their constituents and the world without reporters, editors, and producers filtering the messages they wish to send. Each member and their staff can choose what images, issues, services, and activities they wish to emphasize. While members may differ as to whether they adopt an "insider" or "outsider" orientation on their Web sites (Gulati 2004), they are remarkably similar in terms of the diversity of the issues they raise and the level of influence they portray on their sites, regardless of their race and gender (Niven and Zilber 2001a, 2001b; Zilber and Niven 2000).

Given the power and the potential of the Internet, it is hardly surprising that media-savvy members would use this medium to cultivate relationships with reporters who work for traditional media outlets. Traditional media remain an important link between elected officials and their constituents for several reasons. First, although only a small segment of the American population lacks access to the Internet (one-third), there is a "digital divide" that hampers the ability of certain segments of the population to access the Internet. Blacks, for example, are less likely to use the Internet than whites; and, older individuals (those over age 65) and those who have not graduated from high school are less likely to have Internet access than their younger or better-educated counterparts (Fox 2005). Consequently, traditional



mass media and personal contacts are the only ways that elected officials can reach constituents on the other side of this gap. Second, even for "wired" Americans, traditional media are the primary sources of information about government and politics. Individuals who access the Internet for political news also receive news through traditional outlets at rates that are comparable to non-Internet users (Horrigan, Garrett, and Resinick 2004). Therefore, traditional media remain a vital link even for those citizens who make greatest use of the Internet.

Finally, the Internet is an important source of information for reporters working in traditional media. Thus, structuring one's Web site so it is appealing and useful to the media is one small step that a member may take to shape a reporter's story. Yet for members, garnering and shaping media coverage is an inexact science. Stories concerning Congress compete for space in the newshole with stories about the executive branch. According to Graber (2002), in these contests, it is Congress that frequently loses to the more appealing executive branch. Furthermore, individual members may face hostile local media and disinterested national media (Vinson 2003). Representatives frequently receive less coverage than senators (Hess 1986); and, often the media depicts members in stereotypical fashion based on their race and their gender by emphasizing their interests in and advocacy of issues important to women or minorities respectively, even though these lawmakers tend to have issue portfolios that are as diverse as their white, male counterparts (Larson and Andrade 2005; Niven and Zilber 2001a, 2001b; Zilber and Niven 2000).

Given these difficulties, some members may decide that courting journalists is simply not worth the effort. There could be myriad reasons justifying this stance: electoral security, impending retirement, or a stylistic choice to pursue legislative goals through "insider strategies." Even the most preliminary analysis

reveals significant variation in the degree to which Web sites cater to journalists (Lipinski and Neddenriep 2004). In her pre-Internet-era study, Kedrowski (1996) identified a small cadre of members who consciously sought media coverage to advance their legislative goals. These members were more likely to be Democrats (the majority party at the time of her study), liberal, hold formal leadership positions, young; and, they were less likely to represent a constituency located in the Sunbelt. Nevertheless, subsequent analyses of congressional Web sites found that young, Republican members representing affluent districts were among the first to create sites (Adler, Gent, and Overmeyer 1998), thus demonstrating that there is still much to learn about communications patterns of today's lawmakers.

In findings reported previously, the most common features in an online newsroom are press releases (96.4%), text of speeches (38.6%), and columns or op-ed pieces (36.1%). This information would be primarily of interest to local reporters who are already familiar with the member's biography, voting record, and positions on the major issues of the day. Features primarily useful to journalists covering a member for the first time include biographies, lists of accomplishments, bills sponsored, and letters to colleagues, all of which appeared in fewer than 10 percent of the online newsrooms (Lipinski and Neddenriep 2004). While these findings do not tell us the members' motivations for hosting online newsrooms, we do know that members provide much of the same information to local and national reporters alike, expecting that local reporters may frame stories differently than national reporters. For example, a story that plays as a "partisan dispute" in a national newspaper may be framed as "our guy/gal does well" in the local paper (Kedrowski 1996). Yet, at the same time, particular items may be more useful to local journalists than national journalists, or vice versa. For example, members who include their biography, a description of their district, and

their legislative priorities, may be courting national journalists because local journalists and politically astute constituents would already be familiar with this information. Content that focuses on recent events—claiming credit for government-funded projects; touting one's influence on the Hill—may be targeted at local journalists who would find such stories particularly newsworthy. Thus, for the purposes of this analysis, we speculate that, as a rough indicator, the more features in an online newsroom, the greater a member's interest in courting journalists from both national and local media.

### EXPECTATIONS

Our research objective is to explain the variance among members of Congress in terms of the "media-friendliness" of their Web sites. Or, more simply put, which members are more inclined to solicit media coverage by making their Web sites appealing to journalists? Based upon previous research, we expect to find significant variation among members. First, we expect that senators, with their larger constituencies and larger staff, to be more likely to host online newsrooms and to have more features within them. Second, we expect younger members, who may be more comfortable using new technology to reach their audiences, to be more likely to have online newsrooms with more features in them. Third, we anticipate that conservative members, who are more likely to be part of the Republican majority, will be more inclined to have online newsrooms because they have more opportunities to influence legislation. Similarly, we anticipate that members who narrowly won their last election will be more likely to court the media online in an effort to reduce their electoral vulnerability. Finally, we anticipate that members from the Sunbelt will be less likely to host an online newsroom; and, we do not anticipate any differences by either race or gender.



## METHOD

### Data Collection and Coding

We analyzed the content of all official sites maintained by individual members of Congress in October and November of 2002. We accessed the members' sites through hyperlinks located on the House and Senate Web pages to prevent unofficial sites—those neither funded nor regulated by Congress—from entering our analysis. This strategy yielded a dataset of 531 Web sites. The number of cases fell short of the 535 that we anticipated because three seats were vacant and, one representative, Jesse Jackson, Jr. (D-2<sup>nd</sup> IL), utilized a private site rather than an official site.

We began our analysis by determining whether each site contained a section specifically devoted to journalists. These "online newsrooms" were an excellent measure of media-friendliness because public relations firms and marketing professionals are either recommending them to corporations or advising corporations as to how they can improve their existing newsrooms (e.g., Bransford n.d.; Momorella and Woodall 2005; Moncel 2004; Rambeau 2005).<sup>1</sup> The marketing industry is advocating the use of online newsrooms because it apparently believes that the probability of favorable coverage increases when journalists, working under tight deadlines, are provided with an abundance of positive information about a company in an organized format (e.g., Settles 1996). Therefore, in our analysis, we credited a member for having a newsroom if his or her media-related materials were overtly labeled as being intended for journalists, regardless of whether the materials appeared directly on the member's home page or whether they could be accessed through a hyperlink. During the coding process, we found it easy to identify these newsrooms because members had given them titles that were likely to capture a journalist's attention such as

"Media Corner," "Press Office," "News Room," and "Press Shop." Our analysis showed that 391 of the 531 members (73.6%) maintained a newsroom, with almost all of these individuals (367 out of 391, or 93.9%) choosing to display their media-materials in an area of their site that could be accessed via a hyperlink on their home page.

Once we established that a site contained a newsroom, we counted the different types of materials or features that were available to journalists who patronized the site. We used this count to estimate the extent to which each member was trying to make their site enticing to journalists. Thus, a member who posted press releases, speeches, and a biography received credit for having three media-friendly features on his or her site. However, we assigned members a zero if they failed to maintain a newsroom because we wanted to concentrate on the members' overt attempts to capture media attention rather than instances where journalists might inadvertently encounter helpful materials. As Callison (2003, 35) perceptively observed, "scattering materials throughout a web site does little to make a journalist's life easier." We believe that it was appropriate to use the number of features as an indicator of media-friendliness because newsrooms with more features seemingly provide more information; and, perhaps more importantly, the wider array of materials almost certainly gives journalists greater flexibility in terms of the content that they can incorporate into their stories. A site containing a member's biography might, for example, be useful to a journalist seeking to acquaint readers with a member's background; however, by having access to the member's voting record or position statements, the journalist would then have enough information to address whether the member is effectively representing his or her constituents.

Furthermore, the presence of the member's op-ed pieces or audio links to the member's public speeches, in contrast, might

give the journalist even greater flexibility by allowing him or her to write about the intensity of the member's commitment to various issues as conveyed by the rhetoric in the member's op-ed pieces or the tone and tenor of the member's public speeches—an angle to a story that would almost certainly go unnoticed if the journalist narrowly focused on the member's voting record. In short, the number of features is a good measure of media-friendliness because newsrooms with more features help journalists incorporate different angles into their stories. In the end, our content analysis revealed that members could have used 29 possible features to entice journalists (Lipinski and Neddenriep 2004), but, as Table 1 demonstrates, the number that appeared on any given site was much smaller.

### Estimation Procedure

Our dependent variable, ranging from 0 to 15, was the *number of features* on each member's web site. It was best characterized as an event count because every feature represented a member's usage of a separate strategy to accommodate journalists.<sup>2</sup> Event counts like our dependent variable, by definition, assume discrete integer values bounded by zero at the low end of the distribution, while remaining unbounded at the high end of the distribution. These discrete nonnegative properties foreclosed the possibility that our data were normally distributed and that a linear relationship existed. Hence, according to King (1988, 1989b), modeling the processes underlying our data with ordinary least-squares regression—especially since the count itself is relatively low—would have been inefficient, would have yielded inconsistent standard errors, and could have produced nonsensical results by potentially predicting a negative event count. Changing the dependent variable's functional form, as King observes, is an inadequate remedy because such a model would

continue to suffer from biased and inconsistent estimates.

In recent years, however, social scientists have begun using statistical tools designed to analyze event counts (e.g., Carr and

**Table 1**  
**The Distribution of Media Friendly-Features on**  
**Congressional Web Sites**

Number of features	Frequency	Percent
0 <sup>a</sup>	140	26.4
1	83	15.6
2	71	13.4
3	73	13.7
4	70	13.2
5	39	7.3
6	26	4.9
7	13	2.4
8	5	0.9
9	3	0.6
10	5	0.9
11	2	0.4
12	0	0.0
13	0	0.0
14	0	0.0
15	1	0.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>531</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Summary Statistics</b>		
Mean	2.49 <sup>b</sup>	
Median	2.00	
Std. Deviation	2.35	
Skewness	1.12	
Variance	5.55	

<sup>a</sup>A web site with zero features is one that did not contain an online newsroom.

<sup>b</sup>Lipinski and Neddenriep (2004) reported that the mean number of media-friendly features within online newsrooms was 3.38. Here, our mean dropped to 2.49 because we took into consideration the members who had no media-friendly features because they did not maintain online newsrooms.



Feiock 2001; Lubell *et al.* 2002; Mitchell and Moore 2002). These techniques include various adaptations of both the Poisson regression model (PRM) and the negative binomial regression model (NBRM). The choice between these competing alternatives is dictated by the PRM's assumptions that the likelihood of an event occurring is (a) constant within a given time period, and (b) independent from the previous events that occurred within that period (King 1989b, 764). If these assumptions bear themselves out in the data, then *overdispersion* is absent and the PRM can be confidently applied.<sup>3</sup> However, if either assumption is violated and overdispersion exists, then the PRM will yield inefficient parameter estimates and inconsistent standard errors (King 1989b; see also Cameron and Trivedi 1986, 31). In the case of congressional web sites, the later of the two assumptions seems to have been violated, and there is significant evidence of overdispersion. It stands to reason that, in many instances, politically savvy members have consciously decided to make online overtures to the press. Hence, the number of features available to journalists cannot be a random event because it was the product of an intentional effort to accomplish a specific objective: to obtain favorable media coverage. It, therefore, follows that the presence of one feature increases the probability that others will be present because publicity seekers will almost certainly strive for a greater return on their effort by making multiple features available. This substantive argument is bolstered by our data. First, overdispersion was present because the variance of our dependent variable (5.5) exceeded its mean (2.49) (Cameron and Trivedi 1986; Long 1997); and, second, our likelihood ratio test indicated significant evidence of overdispersion ( $G^2 = 168.3$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). As a result, we applied a derivative of the NBRM rather than an alternative that assumed a Poisson process was in operation.

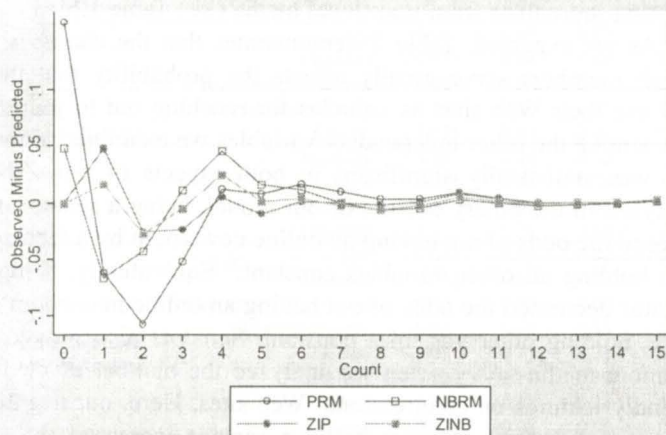
The next issue we confronted was whether to utilize the traditional NBRM or a zero-inflated negative binomial (ZINB) that would compensate for overdispersion resulting from zero counts. This decision was critical because 140 members (26.4%) did not maintain an online newsroom and thus were coded as having no media-friendly features on their sites. Here, our decision turned on the traditional model's assumption that every lawmaker will have a positive probability of having an online newsroom with a given number of media-friendly features in it (compare Long and Freese 2006, 394). Although the probability varies across the lawmakers due to their personal attributes, every lawmaker has at least some probability of having media-friendly features. This assumption, however, does not reflect reality because not every member of Congress is a publicity seeker. Some members, for example, have no incentive to devote their scarce resources to online activities designed to bring them favorable press coverage because they plan to retire from public service. Likewise, some lawmakers may possess idiosyncratic attributes not captured by our independent variables that decrease the probability they will establish an online newsroom (compare Cameron and Trivedi 1998; King 1989a). Therefore, we analyzed our data with a ZINB because it acknowledges this possibility by increasing the dependent variable's conditional variance without changing its conditional mean (Long and Freese 2006).

The ZINB blends a logistic regression with a negative binomial regression. As applied to our research, the logistic regression revealed the likelihood that a member would have no media-friendly features on their site versus one or more features. In essence, this aspect of our analysis allowed us to determine the probability of the absence of an online newsroom because, under our coding scheme, a site without a newsroom was scored as having zero features on it. Conversely, the negative binomial aspect of our analysis allowed us to predict the number of fea-

tures on a site. As a result of this dual focus, we were able to consider two important aspects of a member's online media strategy. First, we were able to determine the likelihood that members, with certain attributes, would create a forum (*viz.*, online newsroom) where they could court journalists. Second, we were able to consider the extent to which members were accommodating journalists by examining the number of media-friendly features that were made available. Therefore, in substantive terms, the ZINB was the appropriate choice because two different processes were likely to be at work: one process that determined whether an event would occur at all (*i.e.*, the creation of an online newsroom); and, in instances where this eventuality was possible, a second process that determined the number of times the event would occur (the number of features placed in the newsroom).

Finally, in addition to this strong substantive justification favoring its use, we preferred the ZINB to its rivals because it was a better fit with our data. The significant positive value of our Vuong test ( $V = 3.52, p < 0.001$ ) indicated that it was a better fit than the standard negative binomial.<sup>4</sup> We also compared the predicted probability of the ZINB to the predicted probabilities of the other count models to identify how well each technique predicted the event count (Long and Freese 2006, 405-07). For each competing technique, this required computing and plotting the difference between the observed and predicted probabilities for each count. Here, points above zero on the *y-axis* indicate more observed counts than the technique anticipated, while those below zero show there were more predicted counts than were observed. Figure 1 demonstrates that the ZINB and the zero-inflated-Poisson (ZIP) did the best job anticipating zero counts, but the ZINB distinguished itself by being a better predictor of ones, threes, and fives.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1: Comparison of Event Count Models in Terms of Their Ability to Predict the Count**



## RESULTS

Our data show that nearly 74% ( $n = 391$ ) of the members maintain an online newsroom. Those who took this important step made at least one media-friendly feature available within this area of their site. Thus, nearly three-fourths of the sites that we examined had at least one feature; two features were most common. Only a handful of sites were located at the high end of the distribution. Representative Heather Wilson (R-1<sup>st</sup> NM) and Senator John Edwards (D-NC), for example, were the only lawmakers to maintain newsrooms with 11 features, while Representative John Linder (R-7<sup>th</sup> GA) surpassed all his colleagues with a



newsroom boasting 15 features. Notably, at the other extreme, one quarter of the members did not have any media-friendly features on their sites, possibly demonstrating a lack of interest in courting journalists from traditional media (See Table 1.).

As we expected, Table 2 demonstrates that the chamber in which members serve greatly affects the probability that they will use their Web sites as vehicles for reaching out to journalists. Unlike the other independent variables we examined, *chamber* was statistically significant in both aspects of our ZINB analysis. In the binary portion of our model, being a senator decreased the odds of not having an online newsroom by a factor of 0.4, holding all other variables constant.<sup>6</sup> Equivalently, being a senator decreased the odds of not having an online newsroom by 62%, holding other variables constant. Senators also proved to be more media-savvy when we analyzed the number of media-friendly features on congressional Web sites. Here, our negative binomial demonstrated that being a senator increased the expected number of features by a factor of 1.7 (or 67%), holding other variables constant. In short, both facets of our analysis showed that senators were more likely than their counterparts in the House to aggressively pursue media coverage by creating online newsrooms and filling them with materials that are ostensibly useful to journalists. Although this finding, standing alone, is important, it is also worthwhile to emphasize that no other independent variable was statistically significant in both the logistic and negative binomial portions of our model. This suggests that the processes underlying the two facets of our analysis are different and the relationship between media-friendliness and our independent variables is complex.

**Table 2**  
**ZINB Analysis of the Number of Media-Friendly Features on Congressional Web Sites**

Model	Independent variable <sup>a</sup>	B	SE	Confidence Interval (95%)	
Logistic regression	Age	0.01	0.02	-0.02	0.04
	Chamber	- 0.97†	0.44	-1.84	-0.10
	Constituency's income	- 0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00
	Electoral security	- 0.39	0.42	-1.21	0.42
	Gender	- 1.07†	0.63	-2.31	0.17
	Ideology	- 0.06	0.44	-0.93	0.80
	Race	0.93†	0.46	0.04	1.83
	Region	0.06	0.31	-0.55	0.67
	Constant	- 1.30	1.21	-3.68	1.07
Negative binomial regression	Age	- 0.01†	0.00	-0.02	0.00
	Chamber	0.51‡	0.09	0.33	0.69
	Constituency's income	0.00	0.00	-0.00	0.00
	Electoral security	0.02	0.11	-0.19	0.23
	Gender	- 0.07	0.11	-0.28	0.15
	Ideology	0.12	0.11	-0.10	0.34
	Race	0.02	0.15	-0.28	0.32
	Region	0.22‡	0.08	0.06	0.37
	Constant	1.05‡	0.30	0.48	1.63
<b>Summary and goodness-of-fit statistics</b>					
Zero observations	140	Log likelihood		- 1051.80	
Nonzero observations	390	LR $\chi^2$ (8 df)		37.53	
N	530	McFadden's		.01	
		Adjusted $R^2$			
$\alpha$ (SE)	0.14 (0.04)	Cox-Snell $R^2$		.12	

Note. The coefficients reported above are unstandardized. The logistic regression nested within the ZINB examines probability that members, with certain attributes, will *not* maintain an online newsroom.

<sup>a</sup>*Chamber* is a binary variable where 1 = Senate and 0 = House of Representatives. *Constituency's income* refers to the median family income in the members state or district. *Gender* is a binary variable where 1 = female and 0 = male. *Electoral security* is a binary variable where 1 = secure and 0 = not secure. We defined a secure member as one who received at least 55% of the vote the last time he or she ran for Congress. We used *Common Space Coordinates for the First Dimension* (Liberal-Conservative) as our measure of ideology. Keith Poole of the University of California San Diego calculated these scores using a scaling technique he describes in the *American Journal of Political Science*, 42, 954-993. The coordinates we used, as well as additional information about how they were calculated, can be obtained on Poole's Web site: <http://voteview.com/dwnl.htm>. *Race* is a binary variable where 1 = ethnic minority and 0 = white. *Region* is a binary variable where 1 = sunbelt and 0 = non-sunbelt. We coded members as representing a sunbelt constituency if they hailed from AL, AR, AZ, CA, FL, GA, LA, NC, MS, NM, NV, OK, SC, TN, TX, and VA.

†  $p < .10$ . ‡  $p < .05$ . §  $p < .01$ . All tests were 2-tailed.

available to the journalists who frequent their sites. Our data showed that representing a Sunbelt constituency increased the expected number of media-friendly features by a factor of 1.2 (or 24.4%), holding other variables constant. Accordingly, age and region were similar to race and gender because they were only meaningful in one aspect of our ZINB analysis. Finally, other independent variables, contrary to our expectations, were not statistically significant in either portion of our analysis. These variables included *ideology*, *electoral security*, and *median family income* of the member's constituency.

### DISCUSSION

Taken as a whole, our findings further demonstrate the complexity of congressional-media relations. First, the finding that senators are more likely to have an online newsroom is hardly surprising. Senators, who tend to represent larger geographic areas with larger populations than their House counterparts, are especially dependent upon traditional media to communicate with their constituents. Second, senators are more likely to receive national media coverage than House members, in part because of the greater power each individual wields, and in part because of the attention that possible presidential candidates receive. They have larger staffs than House members, providing senators with more resources to commit to building and maintaining Web sites. The relationship between senators and journalists is also reciprocal. Journalists need stories, and senators are newsworthy. Senators need publicity, and journalists provide news coverage. Thus, the act of hosting an online newsroom with a large number of features benefits senators and journalists alike.

Age and geographic region also mattered in our analysis. The finding that younger members are more likely to have an online newsroom on their Web sites echoes similar findings by

Table 2 also demonstrates that *race* and *gender* matter, but in a more limited sense than our chamber variable. Neither race nor gender was statistically related to the number of media-friendly features that were present on the sites we analyzed (i.e., the negative binomial); however, both variables significantly affected the probability of members creating online newsrooms (i.e., the logistic regression). In terms of race, being an ethnic minority increased the odds of not having an online newsroom by a factor of 2.5 (or 153.7%), holding other variables constant. By contrast, being a woman decreased the odds of not having an online newsroom by a factor of 0.3 (or 65.8%), holding other variables constant. Therefore, our data indicate that, contrary to our expectations, women and minorities serving in Congress have chosen to interact with the media differently on their sites. Women are more likely than their male counterparts to have created a platform where they can make overtures to journalists, and minorities were less likely to have a media link than their white colleagues. However, neither race nor gender mattered once we restricted our inquiry on the number of media-friendly features.

The negative binomial contained in Table 2 indicates that *age* and *geographic region* play meaningful roles in determining the degree to which members make their Web sites inviting to journalists. As expected, once we controlled for intervening variables, older members were less inclined than their younger counterparts to make helpful features available to journalists.<sup>7</sup> In fact, for a standard deviation increase in the member's age (roughly 10 years), the average number of media-friendly features on a member's site decreased by a factor of 0.9 (or 6.6%). Put differently, for every year a member's age increased, the mean number of expected media-friendly features fell by 0.7%. As for region, contrary to Kedrowski's (1996) findings of a decade ago, members who represented constituencies located in the Sunbelt were more likely than their counterparts to make additional features



Adler, Gent, and Overmeyer (1998) and Kedrowski (1996, for courting traditional media). The reasons for this finding are unclear, although one possible explanation is the digital divide. Just as members' younger constituents are more likely to be wired than those over 65, younger members may be more comfortable using the Internet in innovative ways. Conversely, our region variable revealed that members from the Sunbelt tend to have more features on their sites, although region did not appear to affect the likelihood of a member maintaining an online newsroom. Several possible reasons for this difference come to mind. One is that the South is relatively rural. As a result, senators and many House members see little convergence between the media markets and district boundaries. Even so, other regions, such as the West and portions of the Midwest, also have vast rural areas, which undermines this possible explanation. Perhaps a better explanation is that there is something unique about either the culture or demographics of the South that prompts Southerners to include additional features within their online newsrooms. For instance, the digital divide in the South is large given the region's growing population of retirees and blacks. In response to this divide, members might be more likely to reach out to journalists because their constituents are more dependent upon traditional media. Such a strategy would serve their reelection goals. A third and final possibility is that, because members from the Sunbelt are more likely to be in the Republican majority, members see their online newsrooms as vehicles for increasing their influence in Congress and making good public policy.

Our most significant findings are that women are more likely to have an online newsroom, while ethnic minorities (black, Hispanic, and Asian members) are less likely to have one. Although the collected works of David Niven and Jeremy Zilber (2000, 2001a, 2001b) indicate that women and black members of Congress are often portrayed in stereotypical ways, despite their ef-

forts to present themselves like their white, male counterparts, our findings suggest that women and minorities respond to this challenge differently. One possible reason is that black members, who comprise a large portion of the minority members of Congress, have no need to court the media; they are electorally secure. As Carol Swain writes: "Electoral accountability is so weak in some historically black districts that one black representative told me unabashedly: 'One of the advantages, and disadvantages, of representing blacks in their shameless loyalty to their incumbents. You can almost get away with raping babies and be forgiven. You don't have *any* vigilance about your performance'" (1995, 73). Yet, this argument is belied, at least in part, by our finding that electoral security was not a statistically significant predictor of whether members maintain an online newsroom. This also runs counter to the notion that incumbents subjectively believe they are vulnerable to defeat even when they objectively enjoy a great deal of electoral security (Jacobson 2004).

A second possible explanation, and one that appears more likely, is that black members of Congress may simply choose not to court journalists through online newsrooms (or in other fashions as well) in response to the fact they are depicted stereotypically by the mainstream media. Zilber and Niven (2000, 9), relying on personal interview data collected from press secretaries working for black representatives, revealed that the secretaries perceived the coverage of their member to be "inadequate, frequently inaccurate, and arguably more harmful than helpful." Taken together, the interviews suggested that the secretaries "were less likely to believe their member is treated fairly, less likely to believe their member's priorities and accomplishments are covered adequately, and more likely to believe that there is a general problem with media coverage" (60). In a separate analysis, they found that racialized coverage has a significant negative effect on the way black members are perceived by their constitu-

ents—especially by whites (104-05). Others have found that white public officials are more likely to receive prominent story placement (front page or above the fold) and receive more positive coverage than black officials (Chaudhary 1980). Similarly, research generally shows that the mainstream media is disinclined to include minorities in its coverage (Lester and Smith 1990; Sentman 1983; Stempel 1971). Although some evidence suggests a slight reversal in this trend, the media still pays relatively little attention to the daily problems that blacks face; according to Martindale (1986), it disproportionately portrays them as criminals, athletes, and entertainers. As a consequence, black members of Congress may find it irrational to make overtures to the mainstream media because doing so might be either counterproductive or a waste of time. While media coverage of Hispanic members has not been studied in a similar way, their experiences could potentially be similar.

A third and final explanation for the failure of minority lawmakers to use their Web sites to solicit media coverage is that they can still further their reelection goal while ignoring the mainstream media. These lawmakers, many of whom represent majority-minority districts, probably have forged close ties with journalists in the "ethnic press"—media outlets that cater to either black or Hispanic communities. These media may be more sympathetic to black and Hispanic candidates because the ideology of these news outlets may be more consistent with the ideologies of the minority candidates. For example, Thompson (1993) argues that Mississippi's white press is more conservative on social, political, and economic issues; however, the state's black press tends to be more liberal on these matters. Additionally, editors working for the black press probably have different objectives than their counterparts working in the mainstream, or white, media. As W.E.B. Du Bois observed some time ago, the black press is not simply a business enterprise but as a vehicle

for facilitating the advancement of black citizens (Thompson 1993, 37; see also Simmons 1998). Assuming that this goal is still in operation today, it makes sense that the political objectives of the black press and black lawmakers will be compatible, at least in terms of formulating good public policy (e.g., the periodic renewals of the Voting Rights Act of 1965). Moreover, the close personal relationships editors and members are likely to have cultivated over time could thrive without the assistance of online newsrooms. Thus, in instances where a close relationship exists between an editor and a member, many features typically found within online newsrooms would be superfluous such as the member's voting record, position papers, or biography. Therefore, it makes sense that black members, especially those representing majority-black districts, will focus on building and maintaining ties with black news outlets rather than devoting their scarce resources, online or otherwise, to garnering support and coverage from the mainstream press.

Journalists also tend to depict women serving in Congress as being interested only in "women's" issues (child care, education, health, and reproductive rights) even as they emphasize their concern for a diverse range of topics, and even as they are as likely as men to assert their influence in Washington (Dolan and Kropf 2004; Niven and Zilber 2001a, 2001b). Moreover, even as women have moved into leadership positions, their level of national media exposure has not increased to reflect their elevated status (Larson and Andrade 2005). Yet, contrary to our expectations, our findings indicate that women serving in Congress react to this media bias, and react differently than do minority members. Rather than ignoring journalists, women in Congress are more likely to court them by hosting online newsrooms. One possible reason is that white women do not have a friendly, alternative media source like their minority counterparts (both male and female) who have access to news outlets that cater to



various ethnic communities. Women's magazines such as *Good Housekeeping* and *Redbook* lack political content and a local focus, unlike the ethnic media.

A second explanation, compatible with the aforementioned reasoning, is that hosting an online newsroom is consistent with the reelection goals of women serving in Congress. Women seeking to win or retain public office can only achieve this end if they enjoy considerable support from both their male and female constituents who are geographically intermingled. Male constituents cannot be overlooked because research shows that men are far more likely than women to pay a great deal of attention to national politics, perceive political cues from interest groups, and have more political information at their disposal (Burns, Scholzman, and Verba 2001, 99-107). Likewise, women seeking to retain their seat in Congress cannot afford to overlook their female constituents. Burns and colleagues (2001, 342-47), for example, found that women register more interest and knowledge in national politics when a woman is a candidate or an incumbent in a House or Senate race. Given the realities of modern American politics, it is doubtful that otherwise-disinterested voters would be exposed to the women office holders in any way *other* than through the mass media.

Finally, as part of their larger effort to court the traditional media, women may host an online newsroom as a means of pursuing their legislative and influence goals. While women in Congress are making inroads into high-ranking leadership positions and gaining access to key committees, many women still claim that they are "outsiders," excluded from informal groups and social events like pick-up basketball games or poker nights that their male counterparts may use to augment their influence within the institution (Arnold and King 2002; Gertzog 1995). Therefore, women serving in Congress may turn to the media as an alternative means of drawing attention to their issues, estab-

lishing their reputations, and gaining a place at the bargaining table.

Finally, it is important to briefly mention some of our key non-findings. Contrary to our expectations, electoral security, district median income, and ideology were unrelated to the presence or absence of an online newsroom as well as the number of features that appeared on the Web sites we examined. The absence of a relationship for these variables further indicates that courting journalists transcends most differences among members. These findings, especially when the presence or absence of an online newsroom is at issue, suggest that courting journalists online may, in part, be a function of personal style rather than the product of one's ideological outlook or reelection concerns. Some members, for example, may have a desire to be "work-horse" as opposed to a "show horse" (Langbien and Sigelman 1989), or perhaps other idiosyncratic attributes of these members not captured by our independent variables are important. This lack of certainty clearly underscores the need for future research and additional inquiries into the communication patterns of our lawmakers in this technological age.

### CONCLUSION

This analysis of congressional Web sites provides additional insight into how members of Congress avail themselves of new and powerful technologies that are at their disposal. In this case, we analyze how members use the Internet to court journalists from traditional media sources. While our analysis does not reveal the members' motivations for hosting online newsrooms, we do see that this particular media strategy reflects the complexity of the interactions between members and the media. Not only does our analysis indicate that the Internet has not replaced traditional media as an important communication tool, it shows that members are using their web sites as vehicles for securing re-

election, expanding their influence within the institution, and making good public policy. More specifically, our findings suggest that the way members' use their official Web sites is a product of a complex set of variables including the chamber (House or Senate) in which one serves, the region of the country represented, age, gender, and race. Ironically, other factors that tell us so much about congressional behavior—namely ideology and electoral security—are, for the most part, irrelevant. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that courting the news media and using the Web are quite different congressional activities than the legislative process.

We will be interested in learning whether these patterns remain durable as the Internet age and the institution of Congress continue to evolve. Although time has passed since we collected our data in 2002, we believe that many of the patterns we identified remain intact. This is especially true of our finding that senators are more likely to court journalists than their House counterparts. As we reasoned, disparities between the two chambers are the likely result of senators possessing more individual power and being more newsworthy than their House counterparts, coupled with the tendency of senators to seek additional media coverage to bolster their chances of successfully running for higher office. These factors, of course, are still in operation today. We suspect that, if anything, this pattern has become more pronounced as a host of current senators—Joseph Biden (D-DE), Sam Brownback (R-KS), Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY), Christopher Dodd (D-CT), Barack Obama (D-IL), and John McCain (R-AZ)—have either officially or unofficially expressed interest in running for the presidency in 2008. By contrast, only four members of the House of Representatives are seeking the presidency including Duncan Hunter (R-52<sup>nd</sup> CA), Dennis Kucinich (D-10<sup>th</sup> OH), Ron Paul (R-14<sup>th</sup> TX), and Tom Tancredo (R-6<sup>th</sup> CO), none of whom is perceived to be a front-runner for

their respective party's nomination. Of the remaining independent variables, we believe that age is the most susceptible to change. As time passes, we expect that the elder statesmen of Congress will see the value of the Internet and increasingly solicit advice from staffers who can help them take advantage of this new technology. Furthermore, lawmakers who have been fixtures of the institution will gradually retire from service and be replaced by a younger cohort that came of age during or after the Internet revolution. Thus, we expect that age will be a less meaningful predictor of media-friendliness over time. As for the remaining independent variables, we anticipate that the relationships we identified will remain stable. We see no new developments on the national stage signaling a drastic shift in the relationship between minority lawmakers and the press, and nothing in the political environment seems to have altered the challenges that women face when seeking reelection to Congress. Consequently, we anticipate that changes relating to race and gender will unfold gradually as time passes.

#### NOTES

We extend our thanks to Drs. Clyde Brown and Herbert Waltzer, who coined the term "media-friendly," and who inspired us to measure political Web sites in terms of it. We also owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Alan Acock of the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at Oregon State University for helping us overcome software-related difficulties during the data analysis stage of our research. Finally, we would like to thank Dr. Cole Blease Graham for his editorial assistance and the anonymous reviewers for generously sharing their expertise.

<sup>1</sup> One issue worthy of consideration is whether our results are the product of the members' concern for garnering favorable media exposure or the product of their web-savvyness. Although we lack empirical guidance on this matter, we believe that the relationships we identified are the product of the former rather than the latter. A theoretically and empirically rich body of literature exemplified by Fenno (1973) and Mayhew (1974) makes the case that lawmakers are goal oriented, and their objectives drive almost every aspect of their career-oriented behavior. Given the compelling logic of this claim coupled with the empirical evidence that supports it, we believe that it is more likely that our results were the product of members' desire to pursue media coverage to facilitate their goals of reelection, good public policy, and institutional influence. Although web-



savviness might reduce certain costs for members (information costs, time, and perhaps psychological discomfort associated with unfamiliar tasks), this affect is probably more remote because it would only be in operation after members consciously decide to court the media online (i.e., media friendliness) to achieve their goals.

<sup>2</sup> King (1988), in a general sense, defines event counts as "dependent variables that measure the number of times some event occurs." In a more specific sense, he explains, "Event counts are variables that have for observation  $i$  ( $i = 1, \dots, N$ ) the number of occurrences of an event in a fixed domain. The domain for each observation may be time—as in a month, year, hour, or some appropriate level—or space—as in a geographic unit, an individual, or others" (838).

<sup>3</sup> Overdispersion is defined as a situation where the conditional variance of the event count is greater than the mean (King 1989b).

<sup>4</sup> According to Long and Freese (2006, 408), the ZINB is superior to the traditional NBRM if the Vuong statistic is greater than 1.96. However, if the Vuong statistic is less than -1.96, then the NBRM is favored over the NBRM.

<sup>5</sup> Zero (or the absence of an online newsroom) is arguably a barrier that must be surmounted before a positive count can be reached. The case can, therefore, be made that we should have analyzed our data with a hurdle regression model that combines a binary model with a truncated version of the negative binomial (Cameron and Trivedi 1998; Grogger and Carson 1991; Mullahy 1986). This hurdle approach differs slightly from the approach we employed in that it would have required us to analyze a count of 1 through 15 rather than a count of 0 through 15. Instead, we reported the results of our ZINB because it was technically possible (although it never occurred empirically) for a member to maintain an online newsroom with zero features. This, for example, could have occurred if a member was renovating his or her Web site and simply reached a stopping point during the construction process where a newsroom was created but not filled with features. Therefore, in theory, there was no guarantee that the presence of an online newsroom would yield media-friendly features. We also favored the ZINB over the hurdle model because its truncated binomial analysis would have been based on 390 observations rather than the 530 that served as the basis of our negative binomial. Although we felt justified reporting the results of our ZINB, we analyzed our data with a hurdle regression model as a precaution. The results of this analysis were essentially the same as the ones we reported in Table 2. The same independent variables were statistically significant, and these relationships moved in the same direction as the ones we reported.

<sup>6</sup> When a logistic regression is nested within a ZINB, the binary portion of the model focuses on odds of the case falling into the always zero group as opposed to the not always zero group (Long and Freese 2006, 394). As applied to congressional Web sites, this means we are examining probability that members, with a given attribute, will not maintain an online newsroom. Therefore, in the interest of being technically precise, we framed our results in terms of increases or decreases in the odds of not having an online newsroom. However, outside of the results section, when we are speaking in more general terms, we removed references containing a confusing double negative to enhance the article's readability. Thus, statements within the results section such as "being a senator

decreased the odds of not having an online newsroom" have been replaced by ones such as "being a senator increased the odds of having an online newsroom."

<sup>7</sup> In an earlier analysis of this data that relied on a bivariate crosstabulation (Lipinski and Neddenriep 2004), we found no statistically significant difference by age, holding the member's chamber constant. The different result in our present analysis is attributable to our use of a more sophisticated statistical tool that helped us control for additional variables.

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